

Local community with a global cause

Walk-athon to support The Nigerian School Project created by Dena Florczyk

BY KATIE GRASSO
Correspondent

There are two types of people in this world – thinkers and “doers.” Educator Dena Florczyk happens to be a doer. Three years ago, she embarked on a project that would ultimately provide the resources necessary to enlighten and enrich an entire population called The Nigerian School Project (NSP).

A trip to Nigeria in 2004 spawned a fire within Florczyk's blood that prompted her to devote her time, energy and love to helping the less fortunate people of Nigeria. She remembers the feeling upon return from her trip, “I was just blown away by how a little thing can be so much over there. A little can move mountains.” Since 2004, her organization has gone on to donate textbooks, furniture, uniforms, educational supplies and scholarships to students in Nigeria.

A love of education is why she teaches English at Teaneck High School, and a love for pictures is why she is a photographer. Combining both of these, Florczyk has mastered the art that many strive for in life: to be able to do exactly what we love, using our talents – in order to help others in need.

On Sunday, June 3, Florczyk is giving local residents the opportunity to join in her philanthropic quest by sponsoring a walk-athon. The event is geared to the entire community. Every public school in Teaneck has been invited to participate and Florczyk can only assume that participation will be high, based on the overwhelmingly positive response Teaneck has had to the NSP in the past.

“I cannot stress enough how this truly could not happen if they [Teaneck] did not support me. Everyone is just so incredibly supportive,” Florczyk notes. An example of this support came when

Florczyk started her book drive for the Ireti Senior Grammar School. An outpouring of generosity followed, and Florczyk found herself with not only enough books for that particular school's library, but a surplus leftover to fill two more libraries. With the help of the walk-athon, these two libraries will one day be erected.

“The schools actually allowed me to go into the classrooms and talk to our students about the children in Nigeria. The help that they have offered is amazing. They are offering community service hours to students in exchange for their participation in the walk to give them incentive,” she explained.

Then again, one of the NSP's main objectives is to create a sense of global community and awareness. Florczyk notes that, “It is essential for me to create a global community between Nigeria and Teaneck.” That is where her photography comes into play. Viewing some of her pictures, it is easy to see how Florczyk attempts to personalize the Nigerian students, and therefore transports them from Nigeria right into a Teaneck classroom.

“My goal is to not just to create an awareness for students in Nigeria about us, but to create a curiosity and awareness for our students right here. The Nigerian students know about us and they are so desirous of knowing who we are. They have been so touched that we know who they are and are helping them. They feel honored and I have felt nothing but gratitude from the people.”

Florczyk has even made this into a family affair. A resident of Teaneck, she lives with her husband, Paul, her daughter Rebecca, 17, a junior in high school and her son Jack, a high school freshman. Although they have not yet ventured to Nigeria with her, Rebecca

will be running a girls group in Nigeria where there will be an exchange of letters from Teaneck girls to Nigerian girls. Leaving to go with her mother on June 28, Rebecca will join the other educators who have made the trip from Teaneck to Nigeria with Florczyk. She has taken one teacher per year since the inception of NSP.

“When Jack is a little older, he will go as well. I think it's good that they go and are out of their comfort zone. I like to be out of my comfort zone. It exhilarates me. But I have always felt safe and well cared for in Nigeria and as a mother, I would not put myself or my children in a dangerous situation,” she said.

Rather than having to travel to Nigeria, however, locals can attend the walk-athon on June 3 from 1 to 4 p.m. at the Teaneck High School. “Detective Santiago will be barbecuing ribs, and making rice and beans that will be sold at the event. The owner of Get Fruity Restaurant, Fred, has been incredibly generous in his participation of this event as well. Noel Jardines, a Spanish teacher at Teaneck High School, will begin his walk-athon at 6 a.m. and walk for 11 hours for the cause.”

Each student is asked to have a flat pledge fee of \$5 from any contributor. It should be noted that 100 percent of the proceeds from this walk-athon will go directly to African education, and to the production of the two elementary school libraries that already have books waiting to fill their shelves. It should also be noted that \$5 in America could go a lot further in Nigeria.

Florczyk's talent as a photographer has just paid for a Nigerian girl's education. In the Art Center of Northern New Jersey's 16th Annual Juried Show, one of her photographs recently won third

place in the contest. The photograph is of a Nigerian school girl who, consequently, will reap the benefit of Florczyk's keen eye in photography. “The art is helping to fuel the project. The photo will create awareness, and that is a dream for me,” she says.

“I have never tried to exploit these people. I have always been respectful of them. These are very

beautiful and deserving people, and I am just trying to do my part,” Florczyk adds.

For more information, contact Dena Florczyk directly at 201-314-6649, e-mail her at dflorczyk@nigerianschoolproject.org, or visit the NSP Web site www.nigerianschoolproject.org.

Teaneck
SUBURBANITE
MAY 16, 2007